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Gandhi's Ahimsa- A Critical Review at the Critical Time of War against Terrorism

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Abstract

This paper will seek to understand what is meant by the term that Gandhi refers to as Ahimsa. This research will also seek to evaluate the term from both theoretical and practical angles and will establish that Ahimsa is not possible in its virtual meanings. The critique on Ahimsa and Gandhi's ideology will also be discussed. Finally this paper will propose that the concept of Ahimsa can be of any use for humanity only if it is defined in a broader framework.

Key Word: Gandhi, Ahimsa, humanity, broader Framework

Definition of Ahimsa

Himsa is a Sanskrit word meaning violence and Ahimsa is its opposite. Gandhi coined the term 'non violence' to translate "Ahimsa". He writes that non violence "…is the greatest and the activist force in the world. One can not be passively non violent" (Borman, 1986 p 3).Walker (1994) suggests that Ahimsa means not to hurt any living creature by thought, word or deed, even for the supposed benefit of that creature.

Thus there are two characteristics of Ahimsa that are not captured in the English word of 'non-violence'. First one is that it is not a passive act of non-resistance but it is actively resisting the evil, but with non-violent methods. Second, it is not limited to physical violence alone but it includes any harm by even words and thoughts.

Keeping this in mind, Juluri (2005) defines Ahimsa as: "The term Ahimsa may be appreciated more accurately as not merely avoiding physical violence, but as avoiding cruelty; which may be as much a perceptual issue as a physical one." Gandhi once described Ahimsa as "avoiding injury in thought, word, and deed" (p 399). He further elaborates that "Non-violence in action cannot be sustained unless it goes hand in hand with non-violence in thought" (from Juluri 2005, p 401). Steger (2006) also extends the boundary of violence beyond the usually defined physical terms by saying "violence in its root sense of violation – referring not only to open, physical forms of violence, but also to emotional injury and psychic terror, such as those present when people are subjugated, repressed, and exploited" (p 333).

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Therefore, in its widest sense, a definition of violence also encompasses all those forms of indirect exploitation, harm and structural marginalization, which limit self-realization and harmony.

In Gandhi's life and thoughts, Ahimsa was of supreme importance. Mamali (2001) writes that when ever people studied Gandhi's life they agreed upon one thing that "…nonviolence is at its core. Nonviolence was conceived and practiced by Gandhi in a holistic mode. It includes thinking, feeling, speaking, and acting, and it embraces all types of relationships from the interpersonal to macro social and transpersonal levels" (p 117). Borman (1986) proposes that Gandhi used the term 'himsa' in three meanings, which are 'killing' (physical destruction), 'killing by inches' (terror, humiliation, repression etc) and 'tearing' (hindering the growth of sole or suffering the sole). To avoid all these types of himsa is Ahimsa.

Another distinctive feature of Gandhi's Ahimsa is that he considers it universal and suggests that in no situation it be violated. Gandhi in his writings suggests himsa to be the equivalent of evil; therefore he believes that there is no justification in any situation where himsa is justified.

Is Ahimsa Always Possible?

Now here paper will tend to evaluate the practical aspects of Ahimsa and that is it possible in every situation. This will build this portion on two parallel lines. One of these suggests that Ahimsa is practically impossible to follow and the other advocates that the use of himsa is natural (or even preferable) in certain situations.

Pure Ahimsa is impossible.

The meanings of Ahimsa from the Gandhi point of view are any sort of harm, either physical or spiritual to any living creature without any exception at all. Is this sort of Ahimsa possible to be followed? Many theorists have raised their voice against the universality of Ahimsa. Walker (1994) proposes that to observe this principle in its complete spirit is impossible for men. It is known that every man kills a large number of living beings as he breathes or blinks or till the land. Although this is unconscious but this is still himsa. Similarly we indulge in himsa many times consciously. We catch and hurt dangerous animals and insects such as snakes or scorpions for fear of being bitten and leave then in some out of the way place if we do not kill them. Hurting them in this way may be unavoidable, but is clearly himsa, as defined by Gandhi.

Walker extends the boundary of himsa a little further. He suggests, "If I save the food I eat or the clothes I wear or the space I occupy, it is obvious that these can be utilized by someone else whose need is greater than mine. As my selfishness prevents him from using these things, my physical enjoyment involves violence to my poorer neighbor" (Walker 1994, p 147). It suggests that just by eating, drinking and protecting ourselves, we are committing a type of himsa. There are many movements that criticize the killing of animals for food and emphasize the virtue of being a vegetarian. However Walker (1994) fears that when we eat cereals and vegetables in order to practice Ahimsa to the animal kingdom, it undoubtedly means violence or himsa done to the vegetable life.

Walker (1994) discusses the situation when a thief is catch red handed. Is it OK to trial him and to give him any sort of punishment. Apparently it is also a form of himsa, which is not permitted in any scenario. Then the logical question rises that how to control the robberies and cases of thefts. The practicality of solution, which Walker (1994) advances, is hardly imaginable. He says, "Only he can observe Ahimsa that holds nothing as his own and works away in a spirit of total detachment" and thus, to avoid theft, "...we must diminish the number of our possessions so as not to tempt others"(p 149).

Gandhi was also aware of the logical conclusion of his ideological dichotomies. He said, "The fullest application of Ahimsa does make life impossible. Then let the truth remain though we may all perish" (Borman, 1986 p 9). Is this advice practical?

Himsa is natural (or even preferable)

Many critiques have argued that himsa (violence) is not only normal and natural, but under some circumstances it is also preferable mode of expression. Most of the arguments following this tradition are based on three principles.The first principle is 'prima facie' which means 'on the face value'. Thus a teacher inflicting corporal punishment on his pupils or a mother taking her children to task are guilty of violence. It certainly is himsa from the strict definition provided by Gandhi but one can justify this type of violence on its face value.

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The second principle on which the support for himsa is based is 'the last resort argument'. It suggests that in two conditions, himsa can be beneficial. First is the case where by committing a smaller himsa, a larger himsa can be avoided. The other instance is when no violence or Ahimsa will result in a state that is not just and must be avoided.

(Ellul, 1969) presents seven criteria to justify a war in his book "violence". These are:

1- The cause of war itself must be just.
2- The purpose of warring power must remain just while hostilities go on.
3- War should be the last resort, and all peaceful alternatives must be exhausted.
4- The methods employed during the war to vanquish the foe must themselves be just.
5- The benefits the war can reasonably be expected to bring for humanity must be greater than the evil provided by the war.
6- Victory must be assured.
7- The peace concluded at the end of war must be just.

(From Borman, 1986 p 137).

The third principle is the conception that the mode of violence is more effective and efficient that the mode of non-violence. Mamali (2001) proposes that "…the violent methods reach some of their goals, such as terror, with a much faster speed, and their ideological promoters recommend their use for long periods of time. Between the formation of the Bolshevik (Majority) Party and the bloody revolution that achieved the main goal of the party was a much shorter period than the time elapsed from the birth of Ahimsa to the independence of India" (P 119). Mamali (2001) thus concludes that methods which are purely violent always bring aborted political changes of radical in nature. The violent methods such as bloody political revolutions and gorilla movements mature their goals quickly and produce higher quantity of suspicious, anger, fear and revenge compared to the non-violent movements for the same purpose and goals.

On the basis of these three principles (prima facie, last resort and efficiency) many theorists propose that violence is a natural and normal phenomenon. Juluri (2005) suggests that there are three themes suggesting that Himsa is natural: the first and especially in the post 9/11 scenario is concept of the "clash of civilizations". This concept dictates that cultural differences are inexorable and responsible for violence. The second theme is driven from the view that human history is nothing more than a series of wars and, therefore, human beings right from the pre historic days have always been violent. The third theme is the notion that human nature in particular and nature in general are violent. The science channels on television showing the wildlife where violence is a natural phenomenon and it ensures the equilibrium between various species reinforce this view.

Worldviews about power and violence

Steger (2006) presents various worldviews about violence. He suggests that the Liberal view about violence is evident from its "… fundamental assumption that violence constitutes the natural mode of political power. With very few exceptions, liberal political theorists have failed to challenge this one-dimensional conception of power as bringing violence" (p 336). The Marxist view about violence is not remarkably different from the Liberal view. They suggest violence to be a natural outcome of the class conflicts and the oppression of many by few. Further, many Marxists legitimize violence if it bring the desired results and if it favors the oppressed. Engels put it, "Setting the moral question aside, as a revolutionary I welcome any means – both the most violent one and the seemingly most restrained – that will lead to the end" (Engels, 1967 p 327). Hence from Marxist point of view, the end is more important than the means and a desirable end justifies its means. Discussing about the post structural views about power and violence, Steger (2006) suggests that although "Foucault's notion of power as a multiplicity of force relations challenged liberal agency models of power while at the same time attacking Marx's structural determinism", however, "Foucault's thought, too, follows the modern tradition of Western political theory in its strong tendency to skirt a thorough examination of the reified link between power and cruelty, indicating a surprising continuity between poststructuralist and modernist discourses of power" (p 339). Thus we can conclude that violence and power are interrelated in liberal, Marxist as well as in post structuralist views and they all agree on this point that violence is a natural result of power.

Can Ahimsa be practiced everywhere

Mamali (2001) raises questions about the viability of the Gandhian mode of Ahimsa when viewed across different political systems. He suggests that although it is "… hard to find a serious study that denies that nonviolence was

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efficient in India under the British rule" (p 118) but does it mean that this type of non violence movement will definitely be effective in every situation? He is doubtful that the non violent mode of resistance be effective under regimes such as fascism or communism. He suggests, "There is an incommensurable distance, a nature type of distance, between such regimes and the British rule in India. Even as the nonviolent movement became a stronger and stronger danger to the dominance of the British rule in India, the representatives of the British rule considered it normal to maintain and even to protect Gandhi's civil rights" (p 118). Hence Ahimsa proved to be effective when Gandhi had the rights of not only speech but also getting publishing, of traveling freely and organizing their specific institutions. No one can say with confidence that what would be the case if all these rights were denied, which is quite normal within a totalitarian regime. Just imagine what would happen if Gandhi was denied to get published in the '*Young India* and *Indian Opinion',* a journal when Ghandhi's idea and experiences were focus of attention that influences millions of Indians, what would happen if Gandhi was denied to speak at public meetings to organize his movements against the British rule, what would happen if the news that "he is ready to enter for a given political reason in a hunger strike or silence strike" would be censored. Mamali (2001) feels that Gandhi's life was full of creativity and storng the motivation; he had the character to work out answers even to the totalitarian terror. We found no evidence that the answer would or would not be Ahimsa.

Gandhi's ideology and its critique

Till this point we have seen that Ahimsa is not possible in its purest form and in all situations. Let's see what Gandhi's ideology is and how he deals with the critiques on the universality of Ahimsa. Ahimsa is not a new idea and it has its root back in ancient times. Bose (1987) highlights the "classical Hindu concept of Ahimsa, Jainism, the Laws of Manu, and Bhagavad-Gita." Complementarily to these Indian roots, Gandhi himself explicitly mentioned that he was deeply influenced by Christianity, Islam, Socrates, Confucius, and other ancient sources (Mamali, 2001). Practically, he was much closer to the Christian attitude expressed in the well-known words "Love your enemies" than most of the Christian missionaries. Once Gandhi said that we will make them wear the garlands at the time when our enemies's tank will bombard us. Gandhi deserves the credit to convert the old idea of Ahimsa into practice. It was enriched by Martin Luther King Jr. (1963): "Gandhi was the first person in history to lift the love ethic of Jesus above mere interaction between individuals to a powerful and effective social force on a large scale" (from Mamali, 2001).

Gandhi's belief in Ahimsa was firm and he was determined to rule out any justification of violence. He once said, "I must continue to argue till I convert the opponents or I own defeat. For my mission is to convert every Indian, every Englishmen and finally the world to non violence for regulating mutual relations" (Borman, 1986 p 122). He also opposes the view that violence and wars are natural phenomenon and considers this view as based on certain pre assumptions and biases. He once wrote that history only appears to be a series of wars because this is what stands out, as 'interruptions': "History as we know it is a record of the wars of the world . . . but . . . if this were all that happened in the world; it would have ended long ago. If the story of the universe had commenced with wars, not a man would have been found alive today. …The fact that there are so many men still alive today shows that it is not based on the force of arms but on the force of truth or love. History is a record of an interruption of the course of nature" (Juluri, 2005 p 400).

Gandhi repeatedly states that he finds war to be an unmitigated evil. It is unjustifiable under any circumstances or for any cause, even for the defeat of an evil (Borman, 1986). Thus for Gandhi, there is no possible justification for war. Gandhi's logic is that violence is equivalent to evil and hence it is intrinsically bad. It can not bring the desired results in long run. How can an evil generate a positive outcome? Two wrong things can't produce one right and we can not separate moral and practical from each other.

Gandhi differs with Engels and Machiavelli and was not at ease with the notion that ends can justify the means. For him means are as important as end and the two are not separable. If we get success irrespective of humanity that success is in fact failure and the slogan of nothing succeeds like success is just a reflection of ambitious mind which is morbid in thoughts and reveal its suspicious logic. Mamali (2001) proposes that "In Gandhi's theory and daily interpersonal and transpersonal practice, the goal and means are joined forever; a good goal cannot be served by violent means" (p 116) or as Galtung (1992) says: "The way is the goal." Gandhi believes that the means used to further a goal must be identical in spirit and tendency with the purpose that is to be achieved.

We can, therefore, classify Gandhi's ideology in two parts. First is his belief that violence and evil are equivalent. As evil, by its definition, can not be good, so is the case with violence. Gandhi believed that the concept that violence can bring any good is based on our paradigm constraints and unawareness of its alternatives.

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Steger (2006) describes Gandhi view that "The reification of violence as a natural and, therefore, inevitable feature of the human condition – still a widespread assumption among prominent realists – represents only one conceptual possibility among others. In fact, it is because of the cultural hegemony of the realist paradigm that we often remain unaware of alternative imaginaries of non-violent political power which would educate the individual to freedom" (p 332).

Gandhi's second argument against violence is his conception of inseparability of means and ends. As oppose to Engels, Gandhi can not justify using of unethical, harmful and destructive means even for the achievement of the noblest goals. In his conception, violence resembles highly with 'flood gate'. One can open it intentionally but can not close it. He was of the view that the morality of means always impacts the goals, even after its attainment. He was afraid that if violence were used in the freedom movement against the British, it will become an integral part of our culture and we will not be able to get rid of it even after the freedom.

Critique on Gandhi's ideology

We can reject both of Gandhi's arguments for universality of Ahimsa. His first argument can be rejected due to its circularity as well as background assumption. The conclusion that violence is always bad is based on the assumption that evil and violence are equivalent and hence the argument is circular. We can also challenge the assumption of equivalence of violence and evil as well, however, circularity alone is sufficient to reject the conclusion. It is important that the whole ideology of Gandhi is based on the equation of violence with evil. Hence we have to see what happens to non violence if we remove morality from Gandhi's justification and the equality of evil and violence.

Gandhi's second argument that means and ends are inseparable can be rejected on practical grounds. If this inseparability is true, then how we can justify the mother taking her children to task. Undoubtedly, the punishment the children get can save them from many evils in their later life. Hence we see that Gandhi's claim of Ahimsa's universality is not defendable. There must be a line that separates justifiable violence from the 'evil violence' and without that line, the whole concept of Ahimsa becomes subjective. Probably it was the reason that even the close associates of Gandhi such as Nehru, Patel and Azad never owned 'Ahimsa' (Moraes, 1958).

A line should be drawn.

Because of the problem that Gandhi did not define Ahimsa in practical terms, people have used and defined Ahimsa in different styles, which primarily represent their own background assumptions and not the Ahimsa that Gandhi has defined. On one extreme are people who take Ahimsa in its literal meanings and suggest for stopping animal killing for food, closing all the zoos, elimination of experiments on animals and animal sports as it is himsa against animals (Altman, 1988). They suggest minimizing our possessions to stop thefts and do no harm to a thief, even if caught red handed. I call this group as 'literals'.

Then there are people in mid lands that define Ahimsa according to their intuition and morality. They perform some acts that the first group ('literals') can label as himsa, but this group defines these acts as being Ahimsa. Walker (1994) proposes "…non violence sometimes calls upon us to put an end to the life of a living being. For instance a calf in the Ashram dairy was lame and had developed terrible sores; it could not eat and can breathe with difficulty. After three days of arguments with myself and my co workers I had poison injected into its body and thus put an end to its life" (p 148). Walker (1994) argues that this action was non violent because it was wholly unselfish and the sole purpose was to relief the calf from pain. He emphasizes the point by saying that it was like a surgical operation and he would have done the same thing with his child, if the conditions were same. Thus this camp believes that an act with good intentions does not come in the boundary of himsa. I call this group as 'morals'.

Finally there are some people who take advantage of the concept of Ahimsa and justify all sorts of actions with the help of this concept. I call this group as 'justifiers'. History tells that all wars are initiated in the name of democracy, self determination and freedom of others. Thus all wars are justified. From this point of view the American initiated wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are good examples of Ahimsa as these are fought for the noble cause of enlightenment and self determination. It is interesting that among this group of 'justifiers' we can also find Gandhi, himself. He once said, "…he had been an opponent of all warfare. But if there was no other way of securing justice from Pakistan, if Pakistan persistently refused to see its proved error and continued to minimize it, the Indian government had to go to war against it" (Borman, 1986 p 164). Some historians say that he was not justifying the war, he was just predicting it. But in this case the question arises that what practical steps he took to avoid that war and the answer is – nothing.

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Thus we see that there are three distinctly different groups i.e. the literals, the morals and the justifiers and all three are claiming to be acting upon the noble rule of Ahimsa. In this scenario, the significance of Ahimsa is largely undermined and it has become a socially constructed slogan. Gandhi also recognized this problem and in one of his last self evaluations, he wrote, "whatever I have said does not refer in any way to the failure of Ahimsa, but it refers to my failure to recognize, until it was too late, that what I had mistaken for Ahimsa was not Ahimsa but passive resistance of the weak, which can never be called Ahimsa even in the remotest sense" (Borman, 1986 p 238). Probably Gandhi realized that unless a line is drawn to isolate himsa from Ahimsa, the whole concept would blur. For the ones with power Ahimsa would be fighting for their interests and killing thousands of innocents while for the oppressed, Ahimsa will take the form of passive resistance and cowardice.

Can the line be drawn?

In the last section of this paper, we will analyze that how a line can be drawn that separates himsa from Ahimsa, i.e. justified violence from the evil violence. The starting point can be the seven conditions of Elull that justifies a war. The basic concept in his seven points is being 'just' in purpose, means and after effects of war. But how we can define what is just! It is not possible to define it, as being 'just' is different for different persons. Hence a larger framework is required to separate 'just' from 'unjust' and only then we can separate 'himsa' from 'Ahimsa'.

The next logical question – who can build that framework? The logical answer is that 'only the one who has the position that no one can question and the evaluator who is beyond any evaluation'. Leff (1979) describes it as:

> *"If the evaluation is to be beyond question, then the evaluator and its evaluative process must be similarly insulated. If it is to fulfill its role, the evaluator must be the un-judged judge, the un-ruled legislator, the premise maker who rests on no premises, the uncreated creator of values. Now, what would you call such a thing if it existed? You would call it Him" (p 1230).*

Thus either the framework is to be defined by Him, or else no one can define it.

> *"Either God exists or He does not, but if He does not, nothing and no one else can take his position" (p 1231).*

To conclude I propose that if 'Ahimsa' is to be a hope for the suffering humanity, it should be one element of a big framework, created by Him. An isolated concept of Ahimsa is nothing more than a socially constructed tool in the hands of powerful, legitimizing the process of oppression.

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